



**Konstantin Pleshakov.** *There Is No Freedom without Bread! 1989 and the Civil War That Brought Down Communism.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009. 289 pp. \$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-28902-7.

**Bernard Ivan Tamas.** *From Dissident to Party Politics: The Struggle for Democracy in Post-Communist Hungary, 1989-1994.* Boulder: Columbia University Press, 2007. v + 240 pp. ISBN 978-0-88033-605-5.

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## “Warsaw Express” and the Polish Disease: On the Causes and Effects of 1989 in Hungary, Poland, and Eastern Europe

It is easy to conclude retrospectively how many times the forward looking assumptions and predictions of observers have failed to come true—many surprises were in store for them—during the long post-Communist transition in East Central Europe. The sudden resurgence of parties descending or transformed from former Communist parties certainly belongs to those surprises. Especially striking is the fact that this phenomenon was “pioneered” by the Polish and Hungarian parties, in countries considered as front-runners in the transition since 1988–89. The development was widely discussed and interpreted at that time, and—at least in Hungary—it earned a nickname, the “Warsaw-Express,” arriving to every post-Communist capital according to schedule.

Bernard Ivan Tamas devotes his book entirely to this phenomenon both on a more general level—offering a theoretical explanation—and on a more down-to-earth one, analyzing only one case, the Hungarian, as an illustration of his theoretical considerations. Rephrasing his approach into a single question, he asks how and why a seemingly collapsed, defeated party, destined for long years in opposition benches, could return victoriously just after one electoral period spent “in exile.” In his attempt, he not only critically assesses existing explana-

tions (of which there are many) but also argues—mainly convincingly—that this unexpected turn of events was the result of more than accidental developments and circumstances. It was a consequence of the structural predispositions in the political sphere of the transition period. The Socialists—especially their leaders—possessed political competences necessary to act successfully in a multiparty field while their opponents sometimes suffered from serious deficiencies.

Banal as this explanation seems it is not easy to prove beyond a simple interpretation of the events. Tamas bases his argument on a theoretical framework of party (or political) competence (outlined in chapter 1). In this attempt, he relies on Max Weber’s, Robert Michels’s, and Pierre Bordieu’s works. His starting point is Weber’s and Michels’s argument that politics is a professional activity deserving special skills and as a result leads to the formation of a separate group of professional politicians. This group—inevitably emerging in the circumstances of competitive party politics—has to act on three separate stages, to perform for three different audiences. They have to deal with different elite groups to gain their support and resources, they have to mobilize the electorate as a resource, and they have to run a party while managing in-

ternal conflict and differences. To this aim they need special skills or competences to be successful. On this point, Tamas draws on Bordieu's concept of fields and "habitus," considering "habitus" (socially learned strategies of how to move in a field) in the field of politics as equal to party competence. Competence is crucial to success and is linked to experience and is learnable.

In chapters 2 to 4, Tamas argues that in Hungary only the Socialists were equipped with such competences. The former Communist Party based its rule after 1956 on raising the living standards of the population instead of employing the terror of the previous decade. Party politicians had to maintain unity in a divided organization, pacify certain elite groups (most notably the populist writers), and master at least some mass support. The challengers to the regime were heavily disadvantaged in this sense. The dissident movement (later forming the Alliance of Free Democrats) learned how to delegitimize the Communist party and how to run a limited clandestine organization, but they had no experience in dealing with elite groups and had to build a structured and wide-ranging organization hastily. The populist movement relied on close cooperation with one wing of the communist party led by Imre Pozsgay, and they based their organization (Hungarian Democratic Forum) on people with a few politics-related competences, mainly from the sphere of culture. The younger dissidents, often university students, brought from their education some useful skills and were young enough to learn and cultivate useful habits, but remained weak in their organization and in experience. Even if the—sometimes unintentional—interplay of forces brought down the system and cut short the Socialists' attempts to secure a leading role for themselves in the new regime, the populist movement lacked party competence when they ascended to power.

In the following chapters, Tamas analyzes the events between 1990 and 1994. He dedicates chapter 5 to the implosion of the Hungarian Democratic Forum, led by prime minister József Antall. He argues that the party's demise in 1994 was mainly the result of its inability to control internal conflict due to low party competences. While the prime minister secured his position in government with the help of the Free Democrats and tried to manage the transformation, he was unable to reduce tensions within the populist wing of the party. István Csurka, a prominent figure of the latter, challenged Antall's authority and the party slowly fell into disarray. Members of the national-liberal and the populist wing were subsequently excluded in order to restore its balance. Meanwhile the government committed serious

mistakes (a hike of gasoline prices triggered spontaneous demonstrations in and blockade of the cities by taxi drivers, and there was a long struggle for the influence over public broadcasters), which raised questions over its claim to represent a clear dissociation from the condemned past regime.

The main problem of the Free Democrats (chapter 6) was their origin. The party's core learned politics in the dissident movement and they soon reverted to practices learned in their delegitimizing campaign against the previous regime. For example, after the May 1990 elections, the party concluded a "pact" with the Democratic Forum which enabled Antall to exercise executive power more swiftly after reducing the high number of laws bound to a qualified majority, while gaining concessions regarding the supervision of the public broadcasters and the person of the president of the republic. Yet they soon declared the government an enemy, just like the Communists earlier. Moreover, these dissident politicians—almost exclusively from Budapest—were exposed to the revolt of party cadres from the countryside. As a result, a year long internal struggle followed. A new president, Péter Tölgyessy, who did not belong to the core group of former dissidents, even tried to change the external image of the party, earlier based on the dissident past and relentless opposition to the power. Instead Tölgyessy intended to take a more conciliatory stance. Order was only restored a year later when Tölgyessy was ejected from his position. Meanwhile the Free Democrats had lost the advantage of being the largest opposition party to an extremely unpopular government and Fidesz flew high in the polls.

The most peculiar development of this period was neither the fall of the Democratic Forum nor the deficiencies of the Free Democrats but the ease with which Fidesz gained and lost the support of the electorate and the swiftness with which the Socialists won the 1994 elections (chapter 7). The Young Democrats support was around 40 percent of likely voters for two years and then it took a nosedive; they barely covered the threshold of 5 percent of votes cast. While Tamas attributes their appeal to their fresh look, young and liberal image, and professional, matter-of-fact approach to politics, he also gives a detailed analysis of the reason they lost support so rapidly to the Socialists. He uses data from surveys and statistical analysis to contest the most popular explanations (i.e., nostalgia for socialism, the ideological shift of the electorate to the Left, the all too sudden change of direction of Fidesz to the Right, the advantage of the Socialists in terms of money and manpower, and the overwhelming superiority of liberal media). He proves that

none of these could have been a factor behind the abrupt changes of party support. People with all kind of convictions and all kind of media consumption were ready to abandon Fidesz in large proportion, not just those tending to the Left. Instead he argues that some strategic mistakes led to this puzzling development. In 1993 with its move toward the Right, Fidesz lost its characteristic leftist image and became moderate, neither a repulsive nor an emotionally attaching party. Instead they were a tolerated political force seen equally acceptable to the Left and the Right of the electorate. Moreover, they unnecessarily let internal strife develop as the group around Viktor Orbán pushed out the more liberal circle of Gábor Fodor.

Meanwhile the Socialists, led by their past experiences, tried to preserve party unity and restore credibility. As the day of the elections drew nearer and the other parties took various self-destroying directions, the Socialists' theme of security and expertise turned out to be more and more desirable to the electorate. Their higher level of party competence earned its prize with their victory at the polls.

In chapter 7, a crucial part of the book, Tamas demonstrates his ability to use diverse material (interviews, surveys, and statistical analysis) to support his claims. This part is the most elaborate and it supports well his argument. In earlier chapters, in contrast, Tamas too often reverts to a simple narrating of the political story, drawing conclusions based on scattered and rather anecdotal evidence instead of a thorough analysis of the parties. This approach enables him to portray party elites and even to make a general characterization of them, but it sometimes falls short of his aim. These chapters are a rather condensed story of the political history of Hungary highlighting the most important events and developments but do not give an in-depth analysis of parties as organizations. For example, on the one hand, he does not consider possible competences of people in the new parties who ran different cultural organizations earlier, although it was a way to mobilize people and gave experience in running an institution, which could probably have been useful in party politics as well. On the other hand, he does not address the profound change in personal composition of the Socialist second tier after the Reform Circles took over the county organizations in 1990. These new leaders did not necessarily have the same competence as their predecessors. In this way he gives a picture of party elites without really considering the importance of mid- and lower-party levels as intermediaries between the public and those party elites. These mid- and

lower-party leaders personified the respective organizations at a local level and were often important actors in the field of politics. Tamas is probably right, the whole story is simply a story of the competences of party elites, as his approach implies, but one should legitimately express some qualifications to this argument.

The attentive reader plays tag with Tamas while reading the book, who usually answers the questions coming to mind two-three pages later. The only significant question to which he does not offer a plausible answer is the extent of the collapse of Fidesz's support in the run-up to the 1994 elections. Although Tamas offers a thorough analysis of the events, points out three strategic mistakes of the party leadership, and seems to assume implicitly that these are sufficient enough explanation for what occurred, it is not entirely consistent with the data he uses. As he points out, Fidesz's move to change their image did not lead to the rejection of the party, it only became less profiled and it lost its leftist character in the eyes of the public. However, being the least rejected party can also be an asset; it is not necessarily enough to lose about 85 percent of the party's constituency. Therefore the real question should be: why did Hungarians decide to abandon a party with such hurry that they neither hated or detested? Tamas sidesteps this logical question and remains content with the elaborated presentation of Fidesz's mistakes even though it is possible to offer an explanation based on other factors, such as an analysis of the political situation, the very low ratings of the executive, and the general desire for change. These were certainly significant factors behind the failure of Fidesz's strategy.

The most puzzling part of Tamas's book is the last few paragraphs. He puts forward here "What if?" type questions asking what would have been happened if Fidesz's downward slide had not stopped just short of the 5 percent threshold, therefore resulting in its elimination from the political scene? And what if it had not made its shift from liberalism to the right? He suggests such a turn of events could have resulted in a long lasting dominance of the Socialists who, without effective opposition (the remaining small parties of the former Antall-led coalition fell apart in the 1994–98 period), could have been able to return to certain practices of the former regime. The fact that this reasoning is a widely accepted part of Fidesz's self-justification, developed into a mythologizing narrative, a genre Tamas is highly critical of with his interviewees, there are problems with this hypothetical venture. Although he assumes Fidesz's turn was, ultimately, a beneficial one, other equally valid hypotheses

presuming Fidesz's oblivion and no regression to the earlier regime could be developed. It is possible to argue that the Alliance of Free Democrats would not have accepted the coalition with the Socialists or the latter party would have been split along their significant dividing line between a more technocratic, economically liberal and a more traditionally leftist wing without Fidesz's successful polarization strategy.

Moreover, there is no direct causal relationship between Fidesz's survival in defeat and the survival of democracy as Tamas implies. Tamas simply forgets how Fidesz's presence influenced or could have influenced the events after 1994. He implies instead—relying on his arguments regarding party competence of the individual parties—that the smaller parties were doomed from the beginning due to low level of competence. It is an assumption impossible to prove (not to speak of the presumption that they would not learn anything over time), while one can find good counterarguments. Firstly, the Smallholder' Party was fairly united under József Torgyán's leadership since his ousting from the coalition in 1992 until 2001, when Fidesz began a new tactical approach to this ally, creating new dividing lines inside the party and effectively disrupting it with political pressure and corruption scandals. There was nothing inevitable in its fate. Secondly, the Hungarian Democratic Forum was not split along the populist-national liberal line. Important populist personalities, like Lajos Für, joined the national-liberal wing's new party while the Hungarian Democratic Forum's national list at the 1998 election included national liberals like Béla Kádár. Moreover, after Sándor Lezsák's departure, the party again made a shift toward a less populist stance suggesting that it is simplistic to categorize it by following Lezsák's position.

Both cases reflect the most important factor Tamas does not take into account in his hypothetical assumptions: Fidesz remained an important actor on the political scene and the demise of the smaller parties—not only rivals but also hindrances on its road toward a unified Right—was not predestined, was not independent from the action of the Fidesz, and can only be interpreted in this context. For example, in case of the Christian Democrats or the Democratic Forum, Fidesz's choice of ally—which rival factions they accepted as their partners—contributed to the deepening of the internal dividing lines and finally to the dissolution of these parties. Therefore any kind of hypothesis regarding the fate of smaller parties based on *ceteris paribus* assumptions deriving from assessment of party competence is useless and misleading. Not that it would be impossible to argue

in support of such ideas, but it is redundant in a well-elaborated book based on facts and statistical analysis in its most crucial argument.

Constantin Pleshakov's work differs significantly from Tamas's. While Tamas examines the events of one country, focuses on the specific institutions of parties, uses a well-elaborated methodology with a wide spectrum of material, and limits himself to the history of a decade (with an emphasis on the early nineties), Pleshakov has written a daring essay of Eastern European history, portraying it with broad strokes as a straight story from the interwar period to the change of regimes. It is hardly surprising—given the genre of the work—that he has relied mainly on narrative sources, with a marked preference for memoirs, and the result is an enchanting and dynamic narrative, riveting the reader to the text.

Pleshakov intended to write a history of the region explored from inside, at least as much the outcome of internal factors as external ones, not simply the annex of a grand history marked by the action of great powers. In this attempt, he assumes rightly that the emergence of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe was not just the result of Soviet conquest and empire building strategies, but it had its domestic roots in striking social problems. Seen from this angle the history of Communist Eastern Europe is not just a story of the rise of dictatorial systems installed by the Soviets and their decline as their puppet-master loses its grip on them. Rather, it is a story of domestic conflict, a struggle to reconcile welfare with freedom (hence the title of the book, a reversal of the slogan of Solidarnosc), and a journey from capitalism to capitalism that made people learn the value of freedom but did not resolve the deep-seated social problems of these countries.

According to this concept, the communism that arrived in Eastern Europe with the Soviet Red Army was not an alien import but had mass support since social systems and welfare institutions (free healthcare, guaranteed jobs, housing provisions, etc.) were established with the aim to eliminate the miserable conditions prevalent in the interwar era. Since every country built its own system and its own socialism, their relationship cannot be simply described as subordinate to the dominant Soviets without any possibility of following their own policy line. Nevertheless, dictatorship, oppression, and Soviet influence led to revolts, while under-performance of the economic system brought social unrest, reform attempts, or both. Recurring reform attempts and crises (Berlin, 1953; Poznan and Budapest 1956; Prague 1968; Poland

1968, 1970, and 1980) were signs of a permanent social conflict (a civil war, as Pleshakov phrases it), pointing toward the collapse of the system after it failed to deliver its promise of prosperity *without* freedom. At the end of the road, it was primarily these internal forces that brought down the system while the Soviet leadership wasted its resources in an unwinnable battle in Afghanistan and later, with Mikhail Gorbachev as party secretary, was neither able to implement meaningful reforms nor restrain its allies. Similarly, in the postwar era, the United States followed the events without really understanding them nor their direction and even close to the end made overtures to Gorbachev for cooperative domination over Europe.

APleshakov has put a single country (Poland) at the center along with three prominent sons: Karol Wojtyła (Pope John Paul II), Lech Walesa, and Wojciech Jaruzelski. In Pleshakov's interpretation the developments in Poland—not the least because of the presence of these three key figures—not only exemplified what happened in other Socialist countries, but also served as an avant-garde of the parallel, often interconnected events of the Soviet block. Its turn to the Left at the end of WWII heralded the arrival of communism; its attempts for reform and democratization are forerunners of change elsewhere; and its mass movement in the eighties led to collapse of the system. The composition resembles its traditional national self-image; namely, divided and occupied Poland being the redeemer of Europe with the emphasis laid in Pleshakov's narrative on the Catholicism reinforcing this notion.

He follows the career of the late Pope John Paul II, descendant of a Habsburg officer from its beginnings in the occupied Cracow to his journeys as pontiff to his homeland, revitalizing and mobilizing the masses. Pleshakov stresses Pope John Paul II's importance in developments, especially the way he used his stature to confer legitimacy on Walesa, the leader of Solidarnosc, and on the union. The interplay between the pope deeply convinced of his mission and the true believer workers' leader played an important role in the crisis of 1980 as it made the revolution religious and transcendent, contrary to the earlier, materialist revolts. However, the emerging leader of Poland, General Jaruzelski, son of a noble landowner family, another heir of traditional Poland, stabilized the situation, fended off a potential Soviet intervention, and led the country toward the compromise of the roundtable almost a decade later.

Paradoxically the strengths of the book are almost

identical with its main weaknesses. Pleshakov has constructed a provoking narrative that challenges the widespread assumption of the history of these countries in the twentieth century as the story of changes imposed by foreigners. In this sense the emphasis laid on internal factors is a reconquest of history. However, while Pleshakov insists on essential differences in these countries, even during the Soviet domination, he unintentionally makes their history uniform with his underlying narrative and his focus on one country (the mother of Eastern European revolution) instead of a real comparative approach. Moreover, he boldly draws general conclusions from individual examples, like in the case of the importance and extent of social mobility through higher education where he misses how stagnating this system became in many countries (p. 62). His reliance on memoirs as primary sources adds to the quality of the text, but again reveals the vulnerability of his arguments, especially regarding social transformations and development.

It is hard to escape the impression that in certain cases Pleshakov has conceptualized historical events or situations in order to keep his narrative intact. For example, the idea that Eastern European countries had (liberal) free market economies in the interwar period is questionable in the light of the post-Great Depression transformations of these economies (p. 7). Only a few would define Hungary's 1956 as a civil war as Pleshakov does, and based on the specialist research legitimate doubt can be raised whether the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party voluntarily surrendered its power in 1989 while it entirely controlled the transformation process (pp. 52-55, 167-171). Easily detectable factual mistakes also weaken the narrative, like the assertion that János Kádár fled to the Soviet Union on November 1, 1956 (he was brought there), or that Imre Nagy was shot by the Soviets (p. 138). But even with these shortcomings, Pleshakov's book remains an excellently written essay, excelling with the virtues that made this genre popular, inviting professionals to reassess the region's history.

Drastic, profound, and often abrupt changes in the region's history in the twentieth century easily convey the impression of instability and volatility as the main characteristics of social and political processes. Both Tamas and Pleshakov direct the reader's attention to issues of continuity, and highlight how the underlying social structures shaped the events most easily seen in the outside world and taken as unexpected. In this sense, their works are similar in classifying the twentieth-century revolutions in Eastern Europe not as miraculous and particular, but as "just" human-made, ordinary ones.

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